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Adaptive reuse of built heritage in Portugal: Alcino Cardoso House (1971-1991) by Álvaro Siza as a reference case study

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Abstract: The Alcino Cardoso House (first phase: 1971-1973; second phase: 1988-1991), located in northern Portugal, was one of the first interventions in pre-existing buildings undertaken by architect Álvaro Siza (1933-) to receive national and international acclaim. The design consisted of the conservation of vernacular farm buildings and their transformation into a holiday home and tourist accommodation. It echoes the concerns of the critical revision of modern architecture in the Portuguese context (the so-called ‘third way’ as coined by Fernando Távora) marked by an innovative reinterpretation of tradition: modern principles are introduced while alluding to vernacular construction techniques and materials. This early Álvaro Siza intervention in a rural context has become a reference case-study for the School of Porto architects and provides us with lessons on contemporary reuse of built heritage.

Keywords: Adaptive Reuse, Vernacular Architecture, Built Heritage, School of Porto, Architectural Conservation, Álvaro Siza.

The Alcino Cardoso House, in Moledo do Minho (north of Portugal), was one of Álvaro Siza’s first renovation projects to achieve national and international acclaim. The design project started in 1971 in a cultural climate determined by the critical revision of the Modern Movement aiming at the reconciliation of contemporary architecture with concepts such as tradition, place and context. At the same time, guidelines for the recovery and reuse of historic buildings were changing, moving from stylistic restoration (which had prevailed during the Salazar dictatorship) towards practices more open towards the international debate including the Venice Charter (1964).

This building complex is also a good example of the School of Porto’s approach to interventions in pre-existing buildings, renouncing to any separation between design and conservation. Its methodological approach consisted of using history as a design tool, preserving the values of the ancient artefact, while adding new features in a contemporary aesthetic capable of establishing a relationship of continuity between the old and the new. The Alcino Cardoso House is therefore an exemplary case of adaptive reuse, showcasing a remarkable balance between the conservation of the pre-existing rural complex and the introduction of contemporary architecture to meet the new requirements.

The research methodology is thus based on the cross-referenced analysis of different sources, ranging both from literature review and archive research, as well as interviews with different actors (Álvaro Siza, collaborator, owner, among others) whose testimonies provided

precious information on the conception, design and construction processes. Adopting drawing as a research tool, this paper includes the production of graphic contents, such as demolition-addition drawings, interpretative schemes of the construction phases and of the compositional and geometric principles, as well as an analysis of constructive details.

The first phase of the renovation of the Alcino Cardoso House expresses a clear difference between the new and the old, even though they merge and create relations of dialogue and continuity. The housing programme was incorporated into a triangular annex whose strange geometry, the integration of industrial materials (the flat zinc roof), and its condition as a modern curtain wall in the landscape identify it as a contemporary artefact. At the same time, the use of stone and wood, as well as the reinterpretation of the traditional carpentries, refer to the vernacular constructive solutions of north-western Portugal. Siza thus manages to critically revise modern axioms, such as the glass curtain wall, integrating international compositional grammars into the Portuguese context, but he also succeeds in establishing a dialectic relationship between the new and the old, softening the formal contrast and endowing unity on the whole. On the other hand, in the second phase, even though the programmatic needs and the area available differ, Siza was able to preserve the main features of the house without new volumetric additions. However, localized interventions seek to improve current standards of comfort and use (new bathroom excavated in the basement, new window for improved lightening in the interior spaces) while including delicate modernity in the details.

Indeed, the Alcino Cardoso House echoes the ambitions pursued by the so-called “third way” (bridging modernism and tradition), which emerged in the heat of the “Survey on Regional Architecture in Portugal”, as well as reflecting the search for continuity in the intervention in pre-existing buildings. Rather than directly copying traditional solutions, architects such as Fernando Távora and Álvaro Siza proposed a reinterpretation of vernacular architecture. This formula allowed harmonious insertions of contemporary concepts and aesthetics within the pre-existing buildings and spaces. Nevertheless, it is in the second phase of the Alcino Cardoso House (1988-1991) where more evident similarities with Távora's methods emerge, not only through the adoption of the garnet red colour for the carpentry and woodwork, but also due to the morpho-typological and constructive preservation (in line with projects by Fernando Távora, such as the Casa da Cavada in Briteiros, 1989-1991). This respect for the old matter, however, did not prevent the implementation of important interior modifications to adapt these spaces to their new purpose as tourist accommodation. Regarding Eduardo Souto de Moura, although he led his career along an autonomous path, the false ruin of Alcino Cardoso's swimming pool is somehow aligned with the romantic vision of ruins that characterises some of Souto Moura's first projects.

The current situation of vulnerability at a global scale has determined a recent increase in the search for new sustainable design practices. However, since the 1970's, Álvaro Siza's approach in the Alcino Cardoso House was able to reconcile the legacy of the past with the contemporary needs. It has become a reference case-study in the way architects can reshape pre-existences while preserving its ambience, and its influence is notorious in other works by architects of the School of Porto (Fernando Távora, Alcino Soutinho, Eduardo Souto Moura and many others). By understanding the place before intervening, articulating its traditions, and integrating pre-existences and natural resources we find in Álvaro Siza an important lesson in the reuse of vernacular built heritage.